Administrators, what’s on your mind?

1. Tugging an earlobe
2. Making a “T” with your hands (like “Time out”)
3. Making an “X” with your arms
4. Covering your eye or eyes

Downside—The “offender” must see the person sending the signal to receive it. That won’t happen if that person is breaking an agreement like “Practice being present” by checking their email or intensely engaging in a side conversation with their seatmate. To remedy this, you can give a gentle reminder, as well as the signal.

2. Use a prop as a silent signal.

Some groups use red cards to signal that an Agreement has been broken. (One is given to each member of the group at the beginning of the session, and upon a need, the card is held up like a “stop sign” used by a school crossing guard.) When the offender is no longer breaking the Agreement, the red card is put back on the table. Other groups use flags or a “stop sign” used by a school crossing guard.) When the group is working together in general. This post is rotated every meeting, so all group members take on the process person responsibility at some time during the school year. Sometimes the process person will immediately respond to Agreement breaches by issuing gentle reminders. At other times, they will list out what Agreements were broken and how many times, and report back to the group at the end of a protocol or activity.

Downside—Not everyone is comfortable being a process person, and as a result, may not bring attention to any broken Agreements. If this happens, it could cause frustration in the group with the agreement breakers and the process person, as well.

Clearly, establishing trust among the members of your CFG community is the best way you can ensure that your group’s selected Agreements will be honored. Without trust, members might feel resentful, attacked, and/or defensive when reminded that they have broken an Agreement. Keeping your Agreement List as “a living document” will also go a long way to making sure that your Agreement list will help nurture an environment that allows each member to do their best work when working in their CFG community.

3. Appoint a rotating “Process Person.”

To avoid having the facilitator from having to always point out Agreement violations, some groups assign one person in the group to provide “gentle reminders” as well as make notes about how the group is working together in general. This post is rotated every meeting, so all group members take on the process person responsibility at some time during the school year. Sometimes the process person will immediately respond to Agreement breaches by issuing gentle reminders. At other times, they will list out what Agreements were broken and how many times, and report back to the group at the end of a protocol or activity.

Take the Lead was the theme of the 2016 (South Carolina Association of School Administrators) SCASA 3 Conference in June in Myrtle Beach. President George Ward challenged the membership to be a role model, to mentor someone, to enhance our leadership and to be a change agent. Leaders in Lexington School District One take these challenges seriously and have spent the past year engaging in leadership through the lens of a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Model to enhance our leadership skills.

We selected the Critical Friends Model as a strategy for developing the leadership capacities outlined in our professional learning design for school and district leaders. In 2015-2016, district-wide professional learning was restructured to design conversations around focus and “systemness” (a term from Michael Fullan’s The Principal’s) across schools while still allowing schools the autonomy to customize professional learning. The district professional learning design includes aligned learning targets for teachers, instructional coaches and school and district leaders. Learning targets were intentionally designed as “we can” statements instead of “I can” statements, emphasizing the important role collaboration plays in continuous improvement. (See Fig. 1)

Leadership is a lonely proposition. We cannot do our jobs alone. We must surround ourselves with good people and build positive relationships with them. David Brooks, author of The Road to Character, reminds us “that people are much stronger than they think they are when in pursuit of their talons, their purpose for living. As Nietzsche put it, ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any “how.”’ Critical Friends Groups combat the loneliness of leadership, allowing for purposeful work in a trusting learning community.

We are excited about our CFG work as it represents the basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving schools and increasing student achievement. These efforts are leading to increasing leadership capacity of our principals, teachers, and instructional coaches. So what is the hook? You may be thinking this is surely an oxymoron. How can one be a critic and a friend? Let us explain.

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, “A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.”

Similarly, Critical Friends Groups are typically groups of 8-12 colleagues who “are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (or protocols).” CFGs meet for at least two hours monthly and have unguarded conversation as they think about critical incidents of practice, examine student work, identify school culture issues, and challenge each other’s thinking. A trained CFG Coach facilitates the group’s work. The facilitator uses protocols to provide constructive feedback designed to push deep thinking. Trust is the ultimate human currency in a CFG. In Lexington One, principals, assistant principals, and members of the Instructional Services Team have participated in Critical Friends Coach.

Dr. Glorita Talley serves as the Chief Academic Officer of Instructional Services for Lexington School District One. She is the current President of the SCASA Instructional Leaders Roundtable. Mary Gaskins is the Director of Professional Learning in Lexington School District One, and a CFG Coach. Before serving in this role, she was a middle school special education teacher, literacy coach, and curriculum specialist. Email her at mgaskins@lexington.net

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Instructional Coaches</th>
<th>School and District Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Implement the seven core practices of student-centered coaching:</td>
<td>● Develop capacity as a lead learner, system player and change agent.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Setting goals for student learning (standards-based, engagement and or behavior goals)</td>
<td>● Initiate and develop leaders to build collective capacity in pedagogy.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Using standards-based learning targets</td>
<td>● Provide leaders of teachers with descriptive feedback about their teaching and coaching.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Using student evidence to co-plan instruction</td>
<td>● Analyze and use data to monitor student and teacher growth relative to the established student growth targets.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Organizing coaching through cycles</td>
<td>● Plan and facilitate effective professional learning.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Co-teaching with a focus on effective instructional practices</td>
<td>● Develop capacity for new pedagogies (deep learning tasks, collaborative learning partnerships, and use of digital tools and resources).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Measuring the impact of professional learning on student and teacher learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Partnering with the school leader</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Use strategies to engage in reflective coaching with teachers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Develop strategies and tools for building the capacity of learners.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Use strategies for creating a collaborative school culture.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Microlabs Example Questions

Discussing democracy with high school students

It seems that the meaning of democracy has become more poignant for all of us since the US presidential election. I find myself in common with my students as we seek ways to be more involved and to have more voices heard in our government. My reflections on democracy as a way of sharing power and giving all participants voice connect directly with how and why I value NSRF protocols and CFG work. In this article, I aim to share how a protocol helped my students discuss their ideas of democracy in a democratic way.

I am fortunate to work at a school founded on democratic principles. However, the power dynamics of any school, dictated by age and adult legal responsibilities, can be difficult to translate to a democratic ideal where all voices are represented equitably.

The tension between the responsibilities of our school institution and the individual needs and desires of our students becomes substantial in our high school, where teenagers are ready and willing to take on adult roles, but are often frustrated in their attempts. Reflecting recently on these frustrations led me to create a micro version of a CFG community with some of my students. My goal was to tackle our questions about democracy (on both a grand and a small scale) as we all wrestle with how to make democracy work (both in our country and in our school).

NSRF protocols in the classroom

NSRF® Connections • 2016-17, Issue 3

Democratic at Harmony School

Harmony School, in Bloomington, Indiana, is a small private school with a mission to provide "opportunities for young people to live in and to contribute to a heterogeneous democratic country." One of the ways we try to accomplish this mission is to model democracy within our school. We also aim to reflect heterogeneity in our student population, with tuition determined by a sliding-scale or payment-in-kind. Students participate in regular meetings with их multi-age classes to make decisions about issues from field trip destinations to what kinds of juice to put in the vending machine. Each grade also has representation in the school-wide Solidarity committee. At the high school level, students elect members of an Advisory committee for academic and social support, and a Student Selection committee for admissions. At the faculty level, teachers use a consensus-based approach to make decisions about issues from the school calendar to allocation of school funds.

Of course, the above description is an over-simplification of the complex work of living democracy at Harmony School. We all struggle with the questions of how much power teachers should have over their students, or over administration, for that matter. For example, students don't get to vote on my curriculum standards or banish all homework. But we teachers do our best to incorporate a lot of choice into our lessons, we individualize many assignments, and we use protocols in our classes to generate feedback and allow for equitable participation.

Modified Microlabs

Since the U.S. elections (both the primary and the general election), Harmony teachers and students have spent a lot more time discussing democracy than in previous years. While national politics may dominate many of the hallway conversations, there is also an underlying question of how our school can meet our mission to prepare our young students and future voters. I was eager to use the current teachable moment in our country’s history to help our students better understand and relate the political spectacle of our national democracy to our tiny “democratically run” school.

I recruited volunteers from across the high school to participate in a protocol on what democracy means to them. I gathered a group of eight students in our staff lounge for an afternoon and created a micro-scale Critical Friends Group among them. In our two-hour timeframe, we established Group Agreements, ran a modified Microlab protocol, debriefed and – of course – had snacks. Participants ranged from 9th-11th grades and included representatives from the various school governance committees, as well as students that had transferred from other schools.

To modify the Microlabs protocol to be more like a group discussion, I did not tend to the small group into triads. Students shared their responses to the entire group, with the option to pass and a maximum of one minute per response. Most students did not need an entire minute to share the thoughts and ideas they had written during the silent reflection steps. While I was sure to allow a few moments of silence after each person shared, I did not follow the protocol guideline of preserving an entire minute for each student. This could work for a group of up to ten participants. A key aspect to the front-loading of the protocol was to invite students to share only what it was their turn, but to write down all their thoughts, as well as their questions and comments for each other in the small notebooks I provided.

To generate the questions for the different rounds, I followed advice of the Microlab Example Operations and asked the students first to define the topic, then to describe their experiences with the topic, and last, to share their ideas and suggestions for the future. Because I wanted the participants to reflect on democracy at both the national level, and at the level of our own school. I expanded the protocol to four rounds with four questions. What follows are the questions and my notes of the students’ responses.

What does democracy mean to you?

» Democracy is a type of government in which no one person can overrule.

» In a democracy even the lower class can challenge decisions if they engage.

» In our country democracy doesn’t work, but at our school democracy is possible.

» Democracy allows people that are closest to the issues have the power to change them, so it can be a practical way to deal with issues.

» Democracy means people’s choice.

» Democracy gives people power to have what they want.

What roles do schools play in a democracy?

» Schools should teach ways to be involved in democratic government.

» In a working democracy people can choose not to be involved, and...